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Activities of the Task Team for Africa

BOTSWANA PLACE NAMES *

* Prepared by Baboloki Gabalap, Principal Technical Officer(Mapping)

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INTRODUCTION

The Botswana Place Names Commission (PNC) was established by a presidential directive CAB.51/67. This was necessitated by inconsistencies which occurred in maps. The PNC has been inactive since 1989 and over 150 meetings have been held and over 2000 names discussed (fig 1). The commission has through its deliberations, met problems of conflicts in name spelling or their written form in Botswana maps. The Place Names has been collecting names from each district in an effort to standardize and use recognized orthographies. Prior to the commissions work, the Survey Department relied upon information obtained from District Commissioners, Government Department and their field officers, this means of verification had been found wanting in many aspects due to misinterpretation and incorrect spelling. However the overall aim of the PNC was to examine all the Geographical Place Names in the country and verify their correct spelling and derivation. Since its inception, Department of Surveys and Mapping (DSM) has been its secretariat and was charged with the responsibility of sustained collection of Place Names from the field through its mapping officers and Surveyors.

FUNCTIONS OF THE PNC

In an effort to standardize names, the PNC has always compiled reports and submitted to cabinet for approval. The Commission has also ensured that they do not temper with names that have stood the test of time but only focused on unconfirmed names. Though Setswana(Tswana) is the national language of Botswana, there are about 80 dialects in use in Botswana. Although some of these relate to a very few people, it will be necessary to evolve an orthography which, while not clashing with existing orthographies, will make it possible for the average person to achieve some semblance of the correct pronunciation of a name. Setswana (Tswana) is the national language of Botswana, spoken by a majority of the population. Among some home languages Yeyi is the main language in the northwest, Subiya far north, Kalanga North East, Birwa/Tswapong of the far east-central, Tswana of central and southeastern Botswana. All these needs some form of standardization. (fig 2).

Due to inconsistencies and disputes in the spelling of names and spelling of some names, and concerns raised by authorities in Government, the Commission slowed down its activities in order to strategize its functions for the benefit of all. Several meetings had been held to clarify the uncertainties of names among different ethnic group of the same localities or areas. These differences have impacted negatively on the desired development for the rural areas.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Although the commission has been inactive for a long time, DSM as a national mapping agency which ensures that names are spelt correctly on maps, has started consultation with other stakeholders through the Ministry of Lands and Housing to establish the new Commission which will advise on standardization of names and expand mandate to establish district place names structures which will cover other geographical features. DSM has also started compiling names for the development of Geographical Place Names database. Names on this database will have to be examined by the commission before publication.

Although some work has been done on the proposed Geographical Place Names Act, It was decided that the matter be attended at a later date. The aim of the act is to make provision for the standardisation of Geographical Names and compilation of Geographical Place Names Gazetteer. It will also provide a solid legal basis for the existence of the Place Names Commission and allow the Commission to function with a clear legal mandate stipulated within the Act.

Geographical Place Names play an important role in the map-making process. A map without names would be very difficult to interpret. Names are used daily by the communities and have a variety of research applications. Therefore Botswana needs to consult other countries in the region such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi Lesotho, Zambia and Namibia to benchmark on geographical names activities.

Although DSM staff has attended UN sponsored courses on the study of Geographical Names, it will be appreciated if such courses can be made available yearly since these are essential for future development and expansion of the Geographical Place Names.

Ms Lucy Phalaagae
PRINCIPAL SURVEYOR (MAPPING)

Ms Baboloki Gabalape
PRINCIPAL TECHNICAL OFFICER(MAPPING)

DEPARTMENT OF SURVEYS AND MAPPING (20-02-2011)

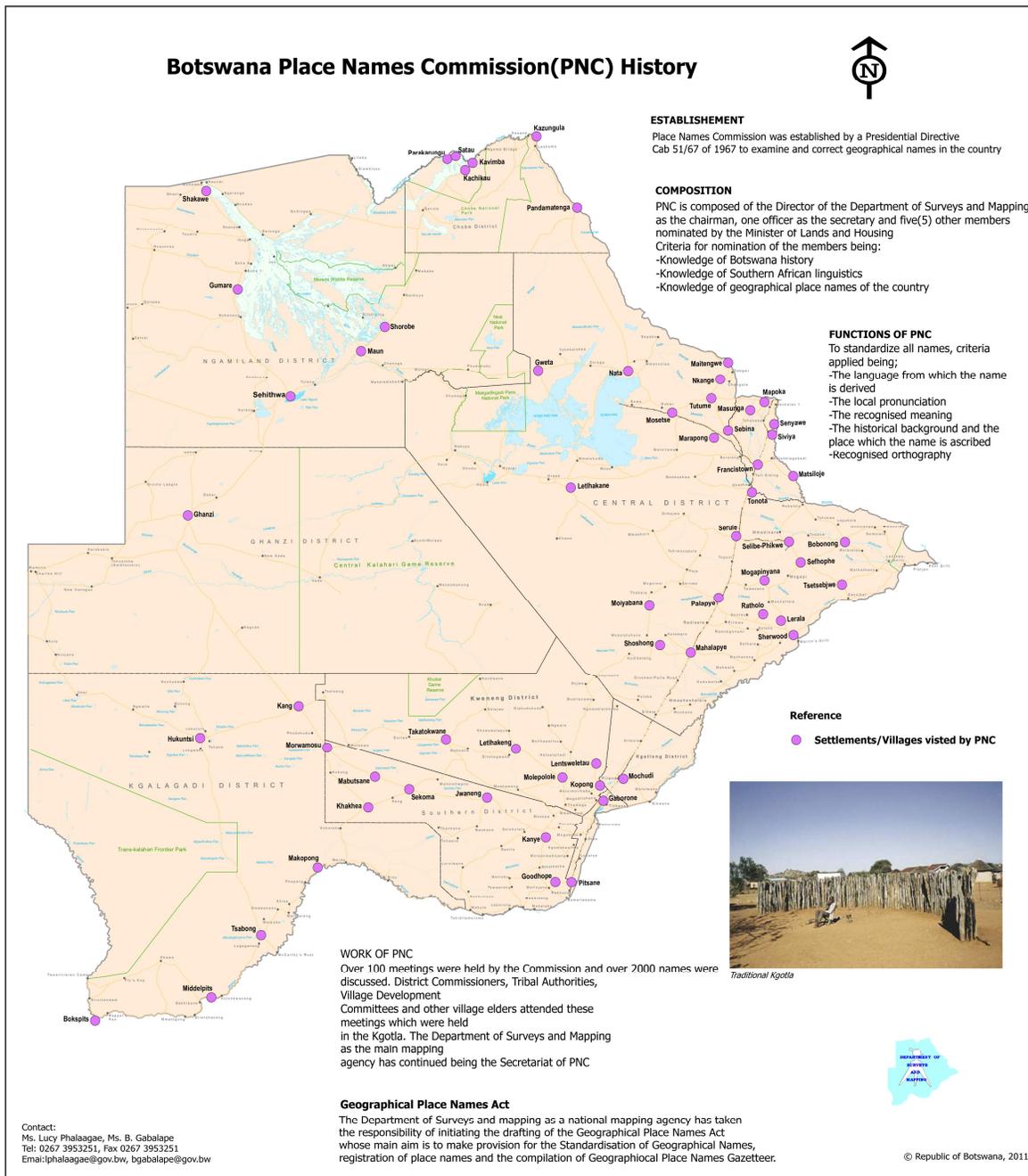


Fig.1: The Place Names Commission visited different villages discussing the derivation and spelling of names. Elders knowledgeable in languages spoken in the areas assisted the commissioners in the deliberations.

